

MULIES ON MAIN STREET

Why Helena's deer problem could soon spread to communities throughout Montana.

BY TOM DICKSON

Last December, Frank Cooper said his last goodbyes to a canine hunting companion he assumed was as good as dead. Cooper, of Helena, had let his English cocker spaniel out into the backyard in the morning. Fifteen minutes later, the dog scratched at the door and limped into the house, jaw broken and body bleeding, before collapsing in shock. It was the second time the 11-year-old pet had been attacked by a deer in the family's yard. "I picked him up and raced to the vet," says Cooper. "I thought he wouldn't live."

The dog survived, but he might not have. In 2006, a doe killed a 110-pound Weimaraner in its owner's backyard. The year before, game wardens had to kill four aggressive bucks that chased a paper carrier under a car and kept him there for several hours. Dave Loewen, FWP game warden in Helena, says he and other game wardens are responding to increasing complaints about deer threatening homeowners, chasing people during their walks, and false-charging children at school playgrounds and day-care facilities.

The emerging deer problem in Helena and other Montana communities is one that suburbanites and even city dwellers elsewhere in the United States have been



BACKYARD STANDOFF A Lab blocks mule deer from entering its owner's yard on the outskirts of Helena. The deer moved off, but they might have held their ground or even attacked. In 2005, a 110-pound Weimaraner was gored to death by an aggressive buck, raising concerns that humans might also be at risk from the city's growing deer population.



NEW NEIGHBORS Attracted by lush gardens and other foods, mule deer moved into Helena in the early 1990s and have thrived since, growing to a population of 700. Though the animals can be aggressive and occasionally pose a threat to people and pets, most calls to FWP are complaints of deer eating flowers or walking across lawns. “These are not threats to health or safety,” says Ken McDonald, chief of the FWP Wildlife Division. Still, deer attacks do occur, such as in 2005 when four bucks chased a paper carrier under a parked vehicle and kept him there for several hours.

struggling with for years. Primarily due to no-hunting restrictions and housing developments expanding into wildlife habitat, urban deer numbers across the country are growing. Many residents consider the animals a welcome addition to their neighborhoods. But others view deer as garden-munching nuisances and even threats to public safety. In Montana, city officials and Fish, Wildlife & Parks staff are caught in the middle as they try to decide if urban deer populations need control and how to do it safely and humanely. “This is new territory for Montana,” says Jeff Hagener, FWP director. “It’s something we haven’t had a lot of time to work out yet, because it hasn’t been a big deal until recently.”

With an estimated deer population of 700 and climbing, Helena has Montana’s worst urban deer problem, but not the only one. State wildlife officials have counted nearly 400 deer within the city limits of Fort Benton, a small town northeast of Great Falls with a human population of fewer than 1,600. Colstrip and Fort Peck have held special management hunts to

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reduce deer numbers. Billings, Missoula, Kalispell, and other larger towns also report growing deer numbers and accompanying conflicts between the animals and humans. The deer boom is partly due to modern wildlife management. The careful regulation

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of doe harvest has helped rebuild a state deer herd devastated in the early 1900s by unregulated and commercial hunting. The recent string of mild winters has reduced natural mortality and helped maintain high deer numbers. Meanwhile, Montana cities have been expanding into the countryside. Lush gardens and shrubbery planted around new houses create an unnatural food source that draws deer much closer to urban areas than in the past. “Housing developments are definitely a problem,” says Gayle Joslin, a recently retired FWP wildlife biologist in Helena.

Irrigated lawns and gardens convert low-nutrition native landscapes into succulent smorgasbords, especially in drought years. “New development is transforming semi-arid lands into the Garden of Eden,” Joslin says. “It only takes a couple of deer to figure out

it’s a much better arrangement, and then they lead others into the new feeding areas.”

Most urban deer appear to live harmoniously with people. But some cause problems. Homeowners complain that the animals devour vegetables and flowers. Deer also denude shrubbery and kill saplings by rubbing the bark with their antlers. And then there are the dangerous deer: Mulies have chased joggers, bluff-charged people in their driveways, attacked postal carriers, and squared off with day-care workers. Though these cases remain uncommon, they are

occurring more frequently as deer numbers grow. “It’s a matter of perspective,” says Ken McDonald, chief of the FWP Wildlife Division. “All the deer in Helena aren’t out killing dogs and chasing kids across playgrounds. Most of the complaints we get have to do with deer droppings on the lawn and deer eating tulips. But if left unchecked, the few real health and safety problems we now see will continue to increase, so it’s important to address deer numbers in Helena before the population grows even larger.”

Large numbers of deer in urban areas can create other hazards. “Mountain lions are quick to take advantage of deer concentrations. Having too many deer may lead to an increase in lion activity near residences,” says Tim Their, an FWP wildlife biologist in northwestern Montana. Game warden Loewen says he has seen a steady increase over the past decade in the number of deer killed or injured by vehicles in the greater Helena area. A few years ago, several deer that wandered into a municipal parking ramp jumped three stories to their deaths after being spooked and having nowhere to flee.

Deer lovers maintain that the benefits of viewing deer far outweigh the problems. “We had twin fawns out here last year, and

to watch them chase each other in the spring was about the cutest thing you could imagine,” says Janet Sperry, a Helena homeowner. Though illegal, some people put out cracked corn and other foods to attract even more deer to the neighborhood. As for deer eating flowers and shrubs, many gardeners modify their landscaping, fencing off plants deer desire and planting others the animals avoid.

Conflicting public views about deer put city officials such as Tim Burton in a bind. The Helena city manager says he sympathizes with residents who like seeing deer, “but when this turns into a public health and safety issue, we feel we have a responsibility to do something about deer numbers.”

Cities are limited in what they can do. FWP manages the state’s wildlife and must authorize all hunting seasons or wildlife culling, which can put the agency at odds with municipalities. “Wildlife is a state resource, and FWP has the statutory responsibility to manage urban deer just as it manages deer outside city limits,” says Burton. The agency has authorized public deer-control hunts in rural Fort Benton, Colstrip, and Fort Peck, but hunting may not be an

option in larger municipalities. Hagener points out that FWP lacks legislative authority to aggressively manage wildlife in urban areas and would only reluctantly authorize special urban deer removal programs in which public hunters could not participate. He says the agency provides biological expertise to communities wrestling with deer problems, offers tips to homeowners for reducing deer damage to gardens and shrubbery, and authorizes FWP game wardens to remove deer causing direct public safety threats. In 2003 the department formed a statewide Urban Wildlife Task Force, which reviewed other states’ efforts to resolve conflicts between people and wildlife such as deer, mountain lions, and bears.

That same year, the Montana legislature provided cities the authority to manage wildlife for public safety and health. Helena formed its own Urban Wildlife Task Force, which included an FWP biologist as well as citizen volunteers appointed by the city commission. Task force members spent a year studying the deer problem, reviewing citizen opinions, and discussing possible solutions. The group created a management plan that called for stronger enforcement of wildlife feeding laws and more public edu-

Dave Loewen often finds himself in the center of Helena's urban deer problem. As a local game warden, he is called in to dispatch aggressive mule deer charging walkers, threatening homeowners, and frightening children. "It's part of our job to remove threats to public safety," Loewen says. He and other Helena wardens have removed more than three dozen deer in the past two years. A few have stood out. "The deer (lower right) in the play area was part of a group hanging around a day-care facility. Before the kids could go out and play, the day-care workers would have to go out and chase the deer away. But sometimes the deer would square off with the workers and stand their ground. That was a real concern. The buck you see me about to dispatch (above) was the most aggressive deer I've ever seen. The day before, we'd been called in to remove a larger buck that had been bluff-charging people. We shot that buck, but before it died this one attacked and impaled it several times with its antlers. It then threw the bigger buck up into the air onto a hedge and then charged us. I still can't believe the power of that deer. I've never seen anything like it. When you think how unpredictable these animals are, it drives home the point that at times they really can be a major threat to people living around them."



MONTANA FWP

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JIM STREETER

BACKYARD BAMBI For every Helenan who wants deer numbers reduced, there is another one content with the population as it is. Some deer lovers say the animals make a welcome addition to their neighborhoods. Others point out that "deer were here first," and that humans should accommodate the wild animals. One homeowner says she has never had a conflict with deer and that wildlife and people should learn to coexist. "We all have to live here together," she says.

cation to help people learn how to live with deer. The plan also included a controversial proposal to reduce the Helena herd to a manageable size by culling 334 deer using professional sharpshooters. The task force looked at several other options, including transplanting and sterilization, but decided

police officers and other city staff. The venison will be donated to Helena Food Share, which has expressed interest in distributing the meat. Because the FWP receives almost no general fund money, commissioners questioned the appropriateness of using hunter license dollars to manage deer that hunters

modify state laws prohibiting public hunting within city and town limits. As is done in some other states, carefully regulated public hunts, such as with bows only, could thin urban herds and satisfy FWP's mandate to manage wildlife while providing additional public hunting opportunities. Cities and counties also have the option of changing zoning to make new developments less desirable by requiring native landscaping, limiting the size of irrigated lawns, and making homeowners responsible for removing fruit trees and other food sources that draw deer into town.

What seems certain is that the urban deer issue is not going away. Winters keep getting warmer. Communities are spreading farther into the countryside. And people continue to disagree whether the buck on the boulevard should be shot with a camera or a gun. Though FWP remains committed to helping communities work through those conflicts, says Hagener, Montanans should not expect easy solutions and quick results. "This is a new issue for this department and for communities," he says, "and that's why we're being cautious. We want to minimize mistakes and make sure we do what's best for people and deer." 🐾

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the most humane and effective course would be through lethal means. If the steady stream of opposing letters to the *Independent Record* is any indication, residents appear divided on the culling proposal. City officials backed the plan and asked the FWP Commission to approve the cull and split the costs with the city.

In November 2007, the FWP Commission agreed to support a pilot program that would include culling up to 50 deer in early 2008 by

could not hunt. "Becoming involved in urban herd reductions can tie the department to an activity that has no funding source," says Hagener. "It puts us in a tough position."

According to Hagener and Burton, FWP and the city of Helena will ask the 2009 legislature to appropriate general fund dollars to help manage the state's growing urban deer herds. Legislators could also

Eat Elsewhere

Tips on preventing deer from eating your shrubs and flowers are as varied as the plants themselves. Some basic advice:

Repellent Method	Pros	Cons
Scent: Rotten eggs, blood meal, garlic, human hair, predator urine, moth balls, strong-smelling soap.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Easy to obtain. Many are home ingredients, and ready-made concoctions are available in garden stores. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deer become used to the smells and lose their fear. Rain washes scent off, requiring frequent applications. Unpleasant-smelling to people.
Noise: Radios, propane cannons.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initially will work to scare deer. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Neighbors might not appreciate your taste in music, or the cannon's startling boom. Deer become used to the sound and lose their fear.
Motion-triggered sprinklers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Surprises deer. No unpleasant odors or chemicals. Simple to set up and operate. Works over large areas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The blast of water surprises people, too. Limited reach. Can be expensive. Not practical during Montana winters.
Fencing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A guaranteed way to keep deer out of areas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The most expensive method. Can be unsightly and impractical.

PLANTS THAT DEER LOVE

Planting these is simply asking for deer depredation: arborvitae, apple trees, crab apple, clematis, euonymus, fir, day lily, tulip, strawberry, hosta, blackberry, raspberry, violet, hybrid tea rose, vinca, trillium, and vegetables.

PLANTS THAT DEER GENERALLY DON'T EAT

Shrubs: barberry, boxwood, forsythia, lilac, potentilla, rugosa, **Flowers:** achillea (yarrow), aconite (monkshood), artemisia, bee balm, daffodils, delphinium, echinacea, feverfew, foxglove, French tarragon, heliopsis, hyacinth, hydrangea, hyssop, lady's mantle, lambs' ears, lavender, marigold, mint, ore-gano, peony, perovskia (Russian sage), sage, sea holly.

Some gardening specialists recommend planting rugosa or other roses along the edge of your yard. Deer don't like to walk through thorny vegetation. Or try planting fragrant herbs such as lavender, mint, catnip, chive, sage, and thyme around flower beds. The smell seems to offend deer.



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